

Evers, DPI Ready to 2017-19 State Budget Request



Request will likely address funding equity and ask for more state support for education

In last month's column, we highlighted several education agenda items likely to be embraced by Republican lawmakers who control the State Assembly. This month, we'll examine proposals State Superintendent Tony Evers is likely to include in the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) 2017-19 budget request to the governor. Our observations are based on recent speeches and news releases as well as conversations with key DPI staff.

■ Funding

The current 2015-17 state budget included minimal increases in state aid for schools along with no per-pupil adjustment to revenue limits, so it would be surprising if the DPI does not propose significant funding reforms. The 2017-19 budget request likely will call for a guaranteed minimum aid and weighting of per-pupil aid to reflect differences in student learning needs.

Evers is also expected to ask for reinvestments in special education to counteract a decade of flat funding and more resources for students learning English.

■ Support for Summer Learning

The budget request likely will propose reforming funding to boost support for summer learning. Proposed changes may include improving funding by allowing districts to fully count summer school students, expanding access by increasing the transportation reimbursement rates, and expanding dual enrollment opportunities for students to take advanced coursework in person or online. Evers will also seek

to simplify reporting requirements to reduce schools' administrative work for summer learning programs.

■ Addressing Funding Equity

In his Sept. 15 State of Education Address, Evers spoke about how funding equity is being lost as schools become more and more dependent on referenda. He shares the WASB's concern that even though citizens throughout the state have passed a high percentage of referenda questions, there are some districts that cannot pass operating referenda and those districts will fall further behind.

To lessen the need for districts to rely on referenda, the DPI budget request likely will ask for more state support to increase budget resources for schools either through per-pupil adjustments to revenue limits and additional general aid, additional per-pupil aid, or a combination of both approaches.

■ Staffing Issues

The supply of quality teachers is a key issue for many districts, particularly smaller, more rural districts. Evers has said his budget request will call for "additional resources for rural schools to compete on a level playing field for teachers."

While the DPI recently promulgated emergency rules intended to reduce staffing hurdles for districts without sacrificing the quality of the teaching profession, the department acknowledges that long-term solutions that address the status and pay of educators will be required. Additionally, both enrollment in and graduation from Wisconsin educator preparation programs are down when compared to 2009 levels.

■ Mental Health Resources

Evers has indicated the DPI will advance policies to put more mental health services in schools, especially in high-need areas, and provide more training for school staff in mental health first aid, screening, trauma-informed care, and brief interventions. Part of his budget request also will include finding ways to co-locate mental health services in schools.

■ Achievement Gaps

Finally, Evers has pledged to address Wisconsin's achievement gaps by encouraging innovation, including exploring the "Districts of Innovation" model used in Kentucky. Kentucky's model was aimed at preparing students for college and career success, but Evers also wants to channel innovation to reduce Wisconsin's achievement gaps. It is hoped that by "re-thinking" what schools might look like, districts will be able to redesign student learning so as to engage and motivate more students and thereby improve student achievement.

Districts would map out what innovations they wish to implement, then apply to the DPI indicating which existing statutory provisions and administrative rules they want to be exempted from in order to implement their innovation. Basically, districts would tell the DPI what restrictions they want removed and why.

The DPI's budget request is expected to be submitted in mid-November. ■

Dan Rossmiller is the WASB director of government relations. Chris Kulow is the WASB government relations specialist.